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Central Florida Fair-goers have much to chew over

Scott Maxwell

TAKING NAMES

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Only a fool walks into the Central Florida Fair unprepared.

There is so much to do -- and eat -- that you must have a battle plan.

My plan focuses on eating. Lots of it. We're talking a deep-fried, grease-soaked, hickory-smoked smorgasbord.

But everyone has their own advice. So as I ate my way through the fairgrounds last week, I also tapped the minds of some famous fair-goers who attended the fair's opening-night party -- including a couple of radio hosts, politicians, a country-music singer, an evangelist and even a police chief.

Let's get started.

As I stepped onto the fairgrounds and inhaled the smell of smoked ribs, fried dough and a few of the less hygienic Central Floridians wafting through the air, I reminded myself: Start slow.

I mean, I had prepared by skipping lunch and logging a few extra miles on the treadmill that morning. But I still didn't want to burn out early.

So I started light -- with an oversized Polish sausage, barbecue ribs, french fries and a little pepperoni pizza.

Plus, I won't lie, when one of my children appeared to be losing interest in a corn dog, I pounced.

I topped it all off with a family-sized serving of fried dough -- the consumption of which in no way involved anyone else in my family -- and washed it down with Diet Coke. Yes, diet. I didn't want to be a pig.

About that time, K92 morning-show hosts Doc and Grace approached. Wiping powdered sugar off my chin, shirt and trousers, I asked for their tips on the fair.

"Bring a few dollars for a corn dog, and play Count-the-teeth with the carnies," said Doc. "The over-under is thirteen."

Grace's suggestion was more innocent. She suggested you start by eating something sweet.

About that time, former Orange County Commissioner Mable Butler walked by. "I like to throw things," she said. "You know, the games, where you pay 50 cents." Best of luck, commissioner.

After that, it was time for some rides. Mrs. Names, the little Nameses and I hit several fun houses and a hang-gliding simulator called Cliff Hanger that was really fast, really cool and a really strong reminder that I'd already downed a Polish sausage.

I needed something to drink. So I grabbed another Diet Coke . . . and another funnel cake.

That's when country-music-singing-weather-forecasting Jim Van Fleet sauntered up. "You have to win a stuffed animal," the Fox 35 weatherman advised. "One that's bigger than you."

Good advice. But there were brownies distracting me.

Next came evangelist John Butler Book. "I like to try to find pork on a stick," he said. You could feel the punch line coming. "The problem is: With all the politicians here, there's not much left."

With the implied rimshot still lingering, it was off to the 4-H booths and agricultural exhibits. This is an important and often overlooked part of the fair.

At the booths, you can see where students use their heads, hearts, hands and health to create everything from recreations of farm life to a miniature golf course. And the kids love the animal exhibits -- especially this one giant rabbit that looked as if he could eat a bushel of carrots all by himself.

Speaking of eating, well, I'll be honest with you people: It wasn't the first deep-fried Oreo that made me feel ill.

But somewhere between the second one and my third Diet Coke, things started a' rumbling.

By the time I stepped off the swing ride, I feared what might happen next if I opened my mouth to interview anyone else.

But there was Orlando police Chief Val Demings.

Duty called.

Chief, any tips for how to do the fair up right?

"Do it all," she replied, her husband, Jerry, nodding in agreement. "Do it all."

Oh, but Chief. I did. And for doing so, should probably be arrested for first-degree assault on my large intestine.

"It's only once a year," she replied.

Fair enough. You can't deep-fry Tums, can you?

Handicapping the House

For those interested in handicapping our congressional races, the national prognosticators suggest two of their jobs might be in jeopardy -- or at least that their re-elections are not givens. Most at risk appears to be Oviedo Republican Tom Feeney, who has a strong and well-funded Democratic challenger in former Volusia state Rep. Suzanne Kosmas. Both the Cook and Rothenberg political reports, which are two of the most widely read in D.C., have put that race on the radar. Less at risk but still in play, say pundits, is the seat held by Orlando Republican Ric Keller, who has so many opponents it might be easier to list those who aren't running. Still, before Dems get too excited, both political reports give the advantage to the incumbents -- as have Florida voters historically.

Eating and bidding to help Kids

With the number of needy families on the rise, the Winter Park Day Nursery was looking for help Friday night. And the organization that provides preschool education to low-income families found just that at its annual Orange Blossom Jubilee. A crowd of about 200, including former Winter Park Commissioners Ken Murrah and Barbara DeVane, noshed on food from Ruth's Chris Steakhouse and Schakolad, bid on auction items and mingled with nursery director Judy Nelson and her staff. Many of the auction "winners" actually left the civic-center event empty-handed, though. That's because some items were actually just pledges to buy things, such as new doors, for the center. Bidding stalled when only three of the five exterior doors had been sold. But guest auctioneer Shannon Burke of 104.1 FM guilted a couple of attendees into buying the last two by suggesting that missing doors could lead to toddlers wandering the busy streets of Winter Park.

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